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THE NEW REPUBLIC
9 September 1981

OFF TRIPOLI'S SHORES

Nothing has better dramatized the contrast between the Reagan and Carter administrations in managing foreign policy than the shoot-out over the Gulf of Sidra. President Carter canceled the Sixth Fleet's regular missile tests in that area last fall to avoid a confrontation with Libya. President Reagan reversed that policy, knowing full well that American planes might be challenged (the issue was discussed in a National Security Council meeting), and US pilots were ordered to fire back if fired upon. Carter's decision was colored by the time and the circumstances—he didn't want another Mideast blow-up with the Iran hostage crisis still unresolved, his brother's seamy ties with Libya were under investigation, and the election campaign was in full swing. If US planes had won a dogfight with the Libyans last fall, Carter would have been accused of staging an international conflict to save his political hide. Given Carter's lousy luck, we might even have lost the dogfight, or won it and then suffered casualties in a ship crash or a missile misfire.

With the Sidra shoot-out, the Reagan administration has definitely laid to rest what might well be called the post-Iran syndrome. The administration knew that US forces had every right to hold exercises in the Gulf of Sidra, and that the principle of free passage on the high seas was being challenged by Muammar Qaddafi's claim that the gulf is part of Libya's territorial waters. That claim, incidentally, is recognized by no other country, not even Qaddafi's ally, the Soviet Union. International law does recognize some bays and gulfs as belonging to coastal nations, but only when the mouth of the waterway is less than 24 miles across. Sidra's is nearly 300 miles across, making it clearly part of the Mediterranean Sea. Three miles of the gulf's waters would be Libya's, according to existing international law, recognized by the United States. Twelve miles might be Libya's if a Law of the Sea treaty ever were adopted. But under no circumstances except an exercise of raw power could Qaddafi extend his sovereignty out to a distance of 60 miles—where the aerial confrontation took place—and the Reagan administration has established that we have the greater power, as well as principle, on our side.

This was not an accidental confrontation, but neither was it the result of US provocation. Nor was it a rash act. It was debated at the highest levels of the government, and discussed in detail with the naval task force commander, who was called to Washington for consultations with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was Libya which somehow miscalculated. Its planes fired first (as even Qaddafi now admits, after an initial lie), and its planes were shot down.

The Reagan policy in the Gulf of Sidra grew out of a wider policy toward Libya and toward America's role as a great power, which also sharply contrasts with the policies of his predecessor. Reagan may be simple-minded about the complexities of foreign policy, but he knows an enemy when he sees one. Carter kept hoping for better relations—"constructive dialogue"—with all countries, no matter how hostile or maniacal, and went to some lengths to build them. In spite of Qaddafi's support for international terrorists and his export of instability throughout Africa and the Middle East, the Carter administration in 1978 and 1979 agreed to resume sales of civilian airliners to Libya when Libya signaled a willingness to sign the Hague anti-hijacking convention and to promise that the aircraft would not be put to military use—though in the end, Carter called off the deal after the Libyan dictator used American C-130 transport planes, delivered in

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